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ABSTRACT

The justification for including a year-long course in practical writing and editing in a research-oriented university's writing program and a description of that course are presented in this paper. Discussed are the responses to four questions: What is practical or survival writing? How much is there of it? What can a university gain from teaching it? How should it be taught? Practical writing is defined as letters, research reports, memos, proposals, summaries, news releases, newsletters, and rewriting. The amount of practical writing is measured and found to make up the bulk of writing produced at any point in history. The reasons listed for teaching practical writing at the university level include the benefit to the students as career preparation, the improvement of academic writing in general, and the need for extensive research on the process, product, and effect of writing. A major portion of the paper describes the organization and methods of the course that incorporate lists of specific writing assignments, visiting lecturers, eight-week long internships, student-prepared oral briefings related to their on-the-job experience, computer editing training, and class production of a promotional brochure. (AEA)

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Writing for Survival

Ruth Mitchell
University of California, Los Angeles

Presented at the Conference on
College Composition and Communication,
Friday, 14 March, 1980

The writing we do in order to earn a living--to survive--is practical writing. Until recently, to mention it within the walls of a major research-oriented university would earn only scorn and reproach. But the graduates of such a university increasingly find themselves at a disadvantage in their professions because their survival, and their advancement, depend on a skill they have not acquired. UCLA's new attack on the writing problem, UCLA Writing Programs, headed by Professor Richard A. Lanham, author of Revising Prose (New York: Scribner's, 1979) includes a year-long course training upper-level undergraduates in writing for survival. Although I shall describe English 136, "Practical Writing and Editing," I think it more important to justify theoretically its inclusion in a university curriculum.

Four questions must be answered: (1) What is practical or survival writing? (2) How much is there of it? (3) What can a university gain from teaching it? (4) How should we teach it?

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What is it? Practical writing means writing which works for its living as well as ours. The writing doesn't attract much attention to itself, as literature does, because it's a tool. Roughly, we can see literature and practical writing as a photographic positive and negative. Without attempting to define literature, we can agree, I think, on a few of its more obvious features: it doesn't perform any work--its social purpose is basically entertainment; it appeals outside its original context:[1] and it invites attention to its surface, for we read to enjoy the words and the patterns they make quite independently of substantive information. To describe literature as context-free entertainment is not to disparage it, nor to suggest that it does not perform a vital social and educational function. The importance of literature is not to be questioned--only its difference from practical writing, its negative. The purpose of practical writing is not entertainment but work; practical writing is context-bound; and it is successful insofar as the writing effaces itself. Practical writing must be read. You can choose whether you'll read a novel or not, but practical writing is part of the job. If it's graceful and witty, so much the better, but that's jam on it.

Characteristically, practical writing is brief, clear, always has a purpose and always has a specific audience. It must yield its message in one reading--any ambiguity, such as you might enjoy in a literary piece, is a distraction in

practical writing. It sells. No matter what form it takes, this writing is selling something--a product, a person, an idea. It is persuading, even when reporting.

And it is creative. The challenge facing a practical writer does not differ from that facing the writer of a novel or a poem--the writer must use every resource to maximize his opportunity. The guidelines are stricter and the motivation external, that's all. But an honest poet or novelist acknowledges restrictions, too, those of convention, genre, taste. They are either more remote or personally imposed, not embodied in the large office at the end of the corridor.

Practical writing includes business writing, technical writing, and advisory writing, or writing for decisionmakers, but I do not teach all of these. This chart schematizes the major genres and their subcategories:

Practical Writing

letters	summaries
research reports	news releases
memos	newsletters
proposals	rewriting

business writing
writing for decisionmakers
[technical writing]
[journalism]

Journalism and advertising occupy an indistinct region between literature and practical writing. Both have a practical purpose, but they accomplish it by entertaining and they often rely on verbal play. Because my course aims to prepare students for business, research, law, government and the professions, I don't attempt to cover journalism. For similar reasons, I don't teach technical writing, which communicates among peers in a technical field, using a jargon and exploiting knowledge writer and reader share. (I think literary criticism is technical writing.)

Business writing only concerns me on a level above that of typing form. I assume that my students will have secretaries to format their work for them. I want my students to worry about what the letter says and how it says it, not how it looks. Writing for decisionmakers is the converse of technical writing--it explains technological or scientific developments to administrators who must make decisions on matters they were not trained to understand.[2] Some of my students will eventually have to produce it as graduate researchers. Like business writing, writing for decisionmakers demands my students' attention only where it intersects with practical writing.

In the illustration you see the major subcategories of practical writing. Letter-writing includes applications for jobs, constituent case-work for legislators, solicitations for funds, and follow-up confirmations of sales.

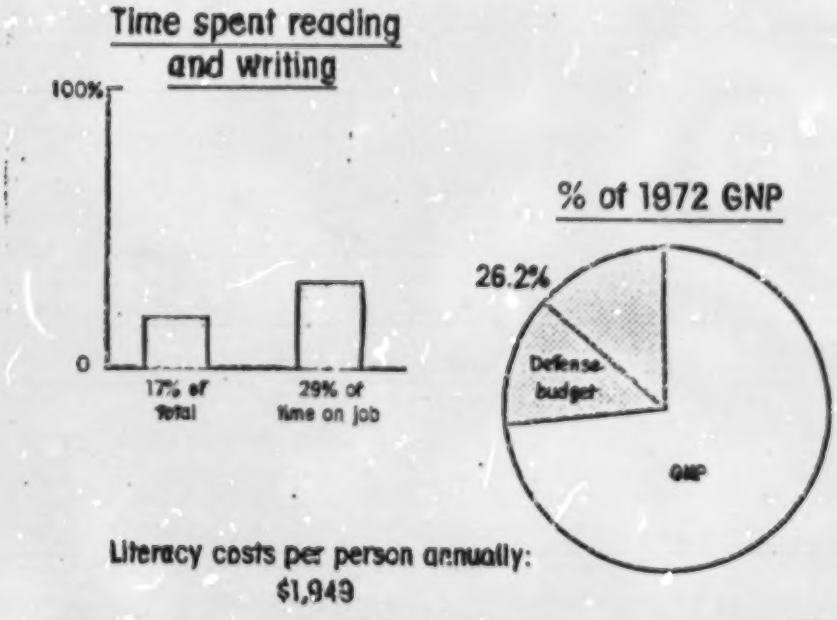
Research reports are not as forbidding as their title seems--any collection of recorded facts, whether gathered by sophisticated manipulation of statistical formulae or by observation, is a research report. The trick is to know what to include. Memos are the oil of the business world. Learn how to write a good memo and you will go far, fast. Proposals, like research reports, are much more widespread than applications for Federal grant. Proposals include any projections of future work. Using these generic terms helps the writer to understand how to approach his material. Summaries are what the top brass needs from their subordinates. The practical world revolves around meetings where there is time only to consider the most significant facts. Rewriting is closely allied with summarizing. Both adapt information to the occasion. News releases are a way of tugging the sleeve of an editor to get attention. Even if you're only going to write publicity for the PTA, you should know where to apply pressure. Newsletters are perhaps the fastest growing genre of practical writing--paradoxically in a society so fixated on the telephone. But every company and every division within a company has its newsletter. They flourish because there is still nothing like print for permanence.

How much practical writing is there? A lot. Fiction, which occupies the bulk of our time in English classes, is actually a very small fraction of the writing

produced at any point in history. We read Shakespeare and Spenser, but the Elizabethans read ballad sheets and broadsides sold in the streets, advertisements, religious tracts and polemics, reports of voyages, bills of sale, legal documents, a great mass of material both preserved and lost.

With universal literacy at least an aspiration, the volume of paper has increased to staggering proportions. Ask any librarian about storage problems. Even with microfiche and microfilm, the pressure is so great that librarians are beginning evaluative record-keeping. Instead of storing all articles on a subject, they will select only those most concise and most useful.

Let's see some figures.



John R. Bormuth, an English educator at the University of Chicago, investigated "literacy activities" as an economic activity.[3] "Literacy activities" include publication and distribution of materials, instruction in reading and writing, salaries and wages for time spent reading and writing at work. The average worker spent 29% of his time reading and writing. Since that's an average, a very large number of people clearly read and write all the time. And an average adult spends about 17% of his waking hours engaged in reading or writing. As a nation, in 1972 we spent $1949 per person on literacy. Bormuth calculated that in 1947, total annual U.S. expenditures on literacy accounted for 20.8% of the GNP. In 1972, calculating in constant dollars, this proportion had risen to 26.4%, or $407 billion. This sum represents twice the amount of the defense budget and 5.8 times as much as we spend on buying cars. Analyzing the costs and benefits of training people in literacy, Bormuth concludes that the benefits are consistently between five and six times the cost.

So Marshall McLuhan was wrong. The world has not become a visually oriented global village. Instead, writing of all kinds has increased, and practical writing has grown geometrically. To understand why, think back only as far as the space program, to 1957. Every technological advance has to be documented, from the proposals and their emendations to the final reports. Every computer program has to be

described and accompanied by a manual. In addition to the technological hardware, machines and processes, there has been a research explosion into their effects and applications. The psychological, social and economic effects of innovations demand investigation and subsequent reports. Administration has proliferated along with technology and its controlling organizations. Research organizations now have their own directory, Research Centers Directory (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Co., 1965). Eighty-seven percent of the institutions listed in it have been in operation only since 1940, and a number of well-known and influential groups began in the 1960's. Writing extends throughout American society: policemen, firemen, nurses, service mechanics all have to write reports.

What can a university gain from teaching practical writing? Rather more than well-prepared students, I shall contend. But we first have to consider what we have been teaching and why it doesn't qualify as practical.

We've been teaching two inappropriate models, one based on literature and the other on data collection. The writing of the standard composition class follows literary models. We ask students for descriptions but do not give them a context or audience. Our model is the personal essay--we would like to produce E. B. Whites if we could.[4] The isolation of composition from any real subject matter ensures that our students will think of it as "English,"

not as a vital element in career preparation.

That's one model--the imitation of literature. Unfortunately, the writing students produce in other classes (when they produce any at all) follows an equally nonfunctional model. How students feel about these assignments can be exemplified by a question a student once asked me: "Is this a research report or does it have to say something?" The research report--the assembling of facts--has three problems as a model: it approaches writing as a task, not communication; it reports facts, not their significance; and it regards those facts as primary, while the writing itself is like the watery sludge in a gold-sluice--a necessary nuisance from which nuggets are retrieved.

That represents the present situation--on the one hand, students are being taught to imitate literature; on the other hand, to demonstrate that they have worked hard. And the reason, I think, is that we as teachers have simply not known how important or how challenging or how creative practical writing is. At the university level, we may have been working under the self-serving delusion that nothing practical should be taught there--that academic means ACADEMIC. If this is the case, then we have been missing our chances.

We should be teaching practical writing for three reasons:

1. The students will benefit;

2. Academic writing will improve; and

3. Research needs to be done.

Since we're discussing the university's probable gain, I shall begin with the third. Extremely little is known with any kind of certainty about writing and its effects. I apply whatever research I can find in my courses, but useful results must usually be ferreted out of journals on cognitive psychology and on reading. Both disciplines outstrip research into writing. The problems of definition and evaluation are enormous, of course, but here are some important questions which need research:

- What influence does form have on comprehension? For example, page size? Book size? The arrangements of contents--why do we have the prefatory material at the beginning instead of the end of a document or book?
- Instead of the usual black and white, would the added cost of color printing be offset by increased efficiency?
- Can we work out a formula for the amount of detail needed to substantiate a point? The amount that smothers it?
- How does writing produce action? Unaided? Or with what auxiliary communication? What visual design?
- Can we define "dull" and "interesting" writing operatively? When do these features affect efficient transmission of substance?

Some answers to these and the questions into which they must be decomposed will come from a federally-funded project on document design now being undertaken by a consortium of Carnegie-Mellon University, American Institutes for Research, and Siegel and Crale, N.Y.[5] There is so much more that we need to know about the process, the product and the effect that all universities could contribute without redundancy.

To return to my first reason for teaching practical writing--the students' benefit. Yes, they will be able to get jobs if they are introduced to practical writing. More important, they will have some idea of the value of writing in those jobs. Executives rise because of efficient memos. A researcher ultimately produces nothing but paper--his report. In addition, students who are trained in practical writing will understand that writing must be directed with a purpose to an audience. Such training sharpens their cognitive skills across the board.

Of course, they will also benefit from the second reason, that teaching practical writing will improve academic writing. Right now, writing done in school and at the university is a stepchild of all disciplines. English treats it as a second-class citizen to literature, other disciplines assign it with no understanding of the potential increase in substantive mastery to be gained by properly organizing a written product. Look at this illustration:

TECHNICAL ORDER	RHETORICAL ORDER
1. Background	1. Problem Response: results or findings or conclusions
2. Problem	2. Process
3. History, literature review, etc.	3. Detailed conclusions
4. Methods – questionnaires, estimating algorithms, etc.	4. Implications
5. Results	
6. Findings	
7. Conclusions	
WRITER-ORIENTED	READER-ORIENTED

On the left you see a process-oriented thesis-final order which prevails in academic writing. This organization is enshrined in the American Psychological Association's Publications Manual (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1974). On the right you see the order which maximizes immediate comprehension. It is an order which demands that the writer not only make his point at once, but know what that point is. Here is the value of the exercise.

Rhetorical order is supported not only by research but by common-sense.[6] Over the years, readers have gotten smart--they read only the abstract and the conclusions. In the case of the abstract, they are depending for their information on something not even included formally in the text. (Remember my research questions sketched earlier.)

So academic writing encourages perverse reading.

When students who have been taught and graded in this way come to write as part of their job (researcher, business man, doctor, whatever), the first thing they have to learn is: don't write the way you did in school. Instead, get to the point first. Front-load the piece, then fill in the details. People don't have time to read through your laborious process.

But why should students have to learn and then unlearn? Let us teach the students how to write effectively, and let us also try to spread the word to our colleagues.

But other opportunities are missed as well. Specifically, the artificial division between academic writing and practical writing impedes the smooth and gradual development of cognitive skills. My UCLA colleague and fellow member of the UCLA Writing Research Project, Mike Rose, researched the cognitive skills demanded by such university writing tasks as there are.[7] He found that they were entirely untaught by the usual composition courses or textbooks. Much as I deplore that situation, I am more interested in the other end of the process, where these same skills correlate with the demands of practical writing. In the following diagram, the middle column represents the academic genre which relies on the skill in the lefthand column. The righthand column shows the transmuted form in the professional and business world.

Cognitive skills in academia and out

serial presentation → lab report → methodology, instructions

synthesis → literature review, summary → state-of-the-art

compare/contrast → exam. question → comparative assessment

classification → genre essay → responsibility memo

analysis → discussion → cost-benefit report.

Serial presentation means relating events exactly as they unfold in time. Lab reports obviously require this skill, but so do reliable instructions. Each requires training and presently lacks it. Synthesis is the skill of assembling disparate materials and weaving them into a usable summary. In the academic world it produces the literature review, luckily not often required elsewhere. Summary, as I said earlier, is vital to practical writing: "Let me know the state-of-the-art on this by 4 o'clock--I've got a meeting." Compare/contrast, the examination question staple, becomes a rundown on the competition--what they're doing that we aren't and why it works better. Taxonomizing is a favorite game of genre critics, but exactly the same skill is used in a CYA memo--it isn't my job, it's yours and here's why. Analysis means applying relevant theory to a phenomenon: "A Marxist Interpretation of The Merchant of Venice"; "The

Double Bind in Henry James's Portrait of a Lady." But the same skill is used when a situation is approached from the point of view of classical economics, let's say--certain features are selected and placed in relationship. Health care, for example, can be discussed entirely as a market commodity without reference to its effect on the mortality rate.

Justification for teaching practical writing, then, rests on more than simply getting students jobs. The study of practical writing enhances the university's usefulness to society and to its own members.

How should we teach practical writing? Practically and theoretically. I have tried for both in my English 136. I offer it here not so much as a model but as a first attempt at bringing practical writing into the university curriculum.

The course lasts the three quarters of an academic year. It is aimed at two kinds of students: English majors who would like careers other than teaching, and students from other disciplines who have some sense of the role writing will play in their professional futures. Organized as a seminar for twenty students, the class attracted more than seventy enrollees its first quarter. Selection of seniors only--on the grounds that others would have a chance in later years--fortunately avoided the question of criteria. The first class consisted of eight English majors, four economics, three psychology, two history, and one each

poli sci, biology and sociology. Next year we plan to conduct two sections, doubling the opportunities.

English 136a inculcated a theory of practical writing by considering subcategories sequentially. Students wrote these nine assignments:

English 136, UCLA 1979-1980

136a: assignments

job application
summaries
constituent letter, news release
research paper
rewriting report
instructions
news item about UCLA
memo on presentational method
legal case abstract

The class heard eight visiting lecturers talk about their own practical writing. The visitors included a former student of mine who took an anti-condominium movement right into City Hall with her dynamic reports and letters; a young politician who had worked for former Senator John Tunney; a researcher from a Washington institute; two investigators in the Los Angeles field office of the U.S. Department of Housing

and Urban Development; the editor of the award-winning alumni publication, UCLA Monthly; an English teacher plying her trade to a new clientele at Southwestern University School of Law; and a technical writer.

The visitors taught the students much; their own writing taught them more. Their application letters wouldn't have encouraged an employer to look at their résumés, let alone get them an interview. Many of these seniors looked upon a D grade for the first time. Here is a sample:

9/28/79

The William Morris Agency, Inc.
151 El Camino Drive
Beverly Hills, Calif. 90048

RE: AGENT TRAINEE PROGRAM

Gentlemen:

Enclosed please find for your perusal my resume. I am currently a UCLA senior majoring in Business-Economics, and shall graduate in june of 1980. I have heard many good things about your program, and would feel very honored to partake in it.

As indicated by the resume you will notice that my experience in the field is limited, yet concise. I am an individual of varied skills and interests, along with a strong desire to succeed in whatever endeavor I may undertake. Clearly my interests lie in business and entertainment, though; a combination which could make for a successful career. Not only

have I learned from my practical experiences, but my college curriculum has included many classes which are directly tied to the show business world, (i.e., business law, advertising, accounting, marketing).

After inspecting both the resume and application I trust you shall find my past history quite acceptable. In that event, I would be very appreciative if you please contact me at your earliest convenience so that we may further discuss any possibilities for my immediate future.

Very truly yours,

This student had been managing a Westwood theatre successfully for a year, but he doesn't even mention the fact. Like his colleagues, he lacked not only practice but a conceptual framework which would guide him in achieving his purpose with his audience. As I have mentioned, academic writing is either literary or subordinated to data collection, and in either case, nonfunctional. It is always being written by someone who doesn't know (the student) to someone who does (the teacher). In the practical world, the situation is reversed. Writing functions because it conveys information to someone who doesn't know it and needs it.

By the end of the quarter, most of them could reliably get the message up front, eliminate unnecessary words, and focus their sentences. Then in English 136b they undertook eight-week internships with local offices. These internships

were arranged either by the students themselves or by the Office of Experimental Education Program (OEEP) at UCLA. Here are some of the internships the students undertook:

English 136, UCLA 1979-1980

136b: Internships — OEEP

law office
undergraduate admissions
NPI, Medical Center
RSVP housing committee
Whittaker corporation
The Wine Investor
Congressman's office
UCLA Daily Bruin
Near Eastern & Latin American journals
L.A. 200 committee
KNBC
KFWB

The three-hour weekly seminars were devoted to work on the writing done on the job and to preparation of an oral presentation. This briefing had to be only five minutes long and include at least three viewgraphs prepared for the overhead projector. Each student presented a dry-run of the briefing, receiving criticism from the rest of the class. On the last day of the class, the briefings were formally presented to a number of visitors, including two internships sponsors. Some briefings were so successful that their authors have been asked to expand them for other groups.

Why a briefing? What has that to do with writing? The answers would be obvious if you could read the reports evaluating their internships. A briefing models in physical form the writer-reader relationship. The components of the communications triangle are all present, with the added constraint of limited time. The briefer must capture his audience's attention with an immediate message, develop the major points, and use his illustrations as a second channel. He can see the effect he is producing in the nods, smiles or yawns before him. Students designed viewgraphs using six colors of specially adapted markers; they were not allowed to use typewritten text. The briefing taught them selection, organization, subordination--and revision. No amount of preaching about the importance of reworking could demonstrate it so clearly as the difference between the dry-run and the finished product. The lesson transferred to the written reports, which required--and achieved--concreteness and brevity; the evaluations will guide future internships. Practical writing indeed.

The third quarter, English 136c, introduces the student to editing.[8] For practical experience, it centers on the class production of a brochure describing English 136 for the university community and for possible funding sources. For breadth, it includes a three weeks' introduction to computer editing on WYLBUR, taught by a member of UCLA's Office of Academic Computing. Like English 136a, the

editing course has visiting lecturers--an editor from the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica, a graphics designer who helps with the production of the brochure, and an expert on typesetting and composition. The course does not aim to produce editors who could compete for a job at Harper and Row, but to expose students to the complete process of producing published materials. The basic texts are the Chicago Manual of Style (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), Words into Type (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1974) and The Elements of Style (New York: Macmillan, 1979). But students are expected to have some acquaintance with the nearly thirty style manuals and style sheets I have collected while studying research writing. Writing a brochure involves the compiling of a miniature style sheet, specific to our needs. Students learn that the editor must decide what orders he will give a printer. They must be sure of an authority for every change they make. Their rigorous training for two quarters has given them criteria to judge when changes need to be made.

Thus the English majors will emerge from their year in 136 with a practical skill (even portfolio items) they can offer employers. Students from other disciplines will go into graduate school or professional training equipped to write efficiently and to review intelligently the work of others. Both will be able to produce documents easily readable and immediately accessible. For they will have

learned how to analyze their own purposes and to play the role of the audience they are addressing. What is an employer looking for in my letter? What is a granting agency looking for in a proposal? What are a politician's purposes when he replies to a constituent? How can he keep the person's vote and disassociate himself from undesirable connotations? What does a decisionmaker want when he reads a research report? Why am I writing this memo? Do I want to conceal or reveal? This analysis is the basis of practical writing. For their survival, our students need to learn it.

Notes

[1] John M. Ellis, in The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) makes this freedom from original context the basis of his definition: "Literary texts . . . are defined as those that outgrow the original context of their utterance and which function in the community at large" (p. 112).

[2] I am presently preparing a book on writing for decisionmakers, a genre not understood or taught.

[3] A summary of the research is contained in the "Science and the Citizen" column of Scientific American, 240, 3 (March, 1979), p. 78.

[4] A point recently made eloquently by Laurence Behrens in "Meditations, Reminiscences, Polemics: Composition Readers and the Service Course," College English, 41, 5 (January, 1980), 561-570.

[5] The consortium has established the Document Design Center in Washington, D.C., and issues a monthly newsletter appropriately entitled Fine Print.

[6] Research includes Bonnie J. F. Meyer, "Identification of the Structure of Prose and Its Implications for the

the Study of Reading and Memory," Journal of Reading Behavior, 7 (1975), 6-46, and Perry Thorndyke, "Cognitive Structures in Comprehension and Memory of Narrative Discourse," Cognitive Psychology, 9 (1977), 77-110, as well as the implications of frame theory.

[7] Mike Rose, "Teaching University Discourse," Working Papers, II (1979), UCLA Writing Research Project, UCLA, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90024.

[8] In April, 1980, English 136c is still in progress. No evaluation of its success will be possible until after June, 1980.

Practical Writing

letters	summaries
research reports	news releases
memos	newsletters
proposals	rewriting

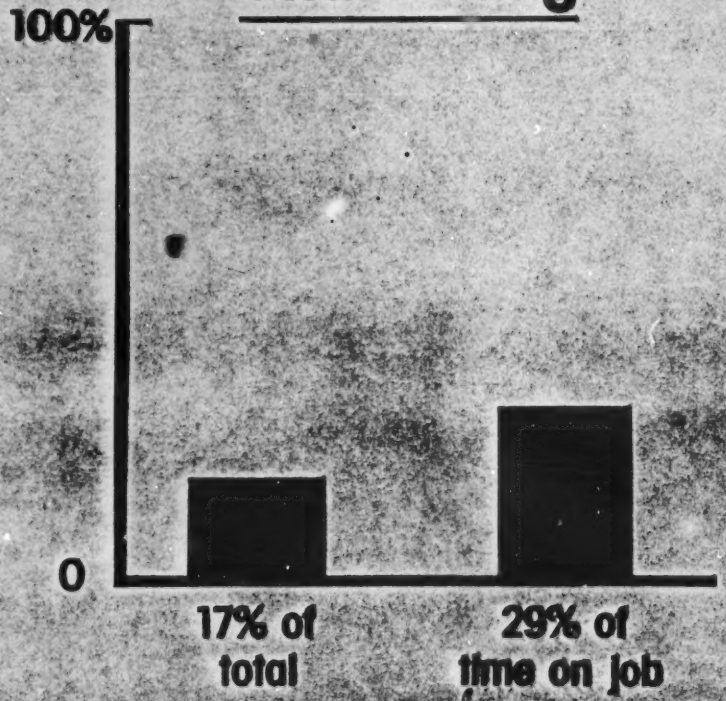
business writing

writing for decisionmakers

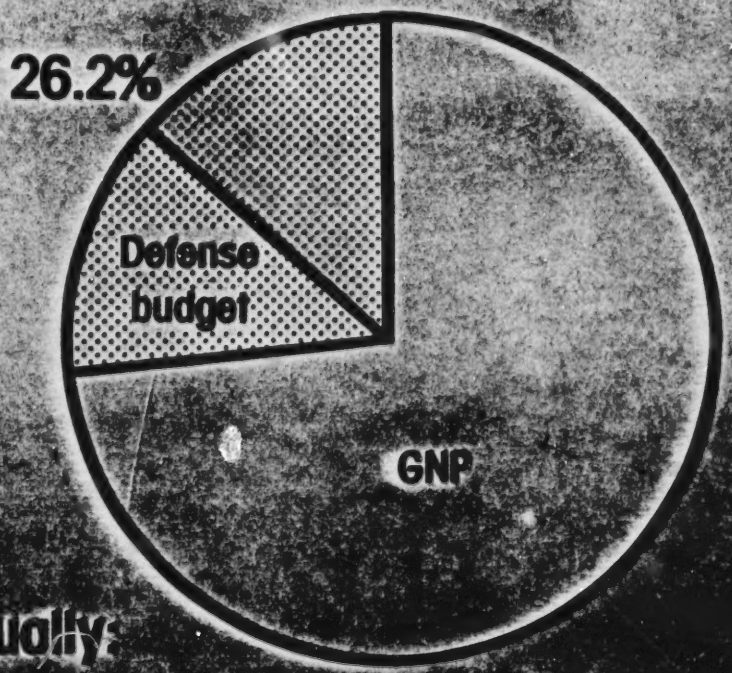
[technical writing]

[journalism]

Time spent reading and writing



% of 1972 GNP



Literacy costs per person annually:
$1.94

TECHNICAL ORDER

1. Background
2. Problem
3. History, literature review, etc.
4. Methods -- questionnaires, estimating algorithms, etc.
5. Results
6. Findings
7. Conclusions

WRITER-ORIENTED

RHETORICAL ORDER

1. Problem
   Response: results or findings or conclusions
2. Process
3. Detailed conclusions
4. Implications

READER-ORIENTED

Cognitive skills in academia and out

serial presentation → lab report → methodology, instructions

synthesis → literature review, summary → state-of-the-art

compare/contrast → exam. question → comparative assessment

classification → genre essay → responsibility memo

analysis → discussion → cost-benefit report.

English 136, UCLA 1979-1980

136a: assignments

- job application
- summaries
- constituent letter, news release
- research paper
- rewriting report
- instructions
- news item about UCLA
- memo on presentational method
- legal case abstract

136b: internships — OEEP

- law office
- undergraduate admissions
- NPI, Medical Center
- RSVP housing committee
- Whittaker corporation
- The Wine Investor
- Congressman's office
- UCLA Daily Bruin
- Near Eastern & Latin American journals
- L.A. 200 committee
- KNBC
- KFWB

136c: editing

- editors' marks
- proofreading
- production
- expert instruction
- APA style
- GPO style
- Chicago Manual

General Evaluation